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The Fight

AT

Diamond Island.



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THE FIGHT AT

Diamond Island,

LAKE GEORGE.

BY THE REV. B. F. DECOSTA,
Author of "Notes on the History of Fort George," &c. &c.
Benjamin Franklin

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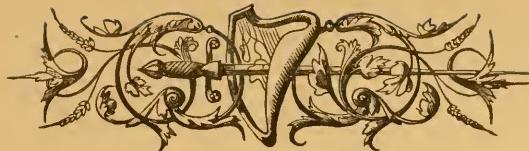
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THE FIGHT AT DIAMOND ISLAND.

STANDING upon one of the heights near the head or southern end of Lake George,¹ the tourist looks down on the placid waters, and sees at his feet a small island covered with verdure, and glowing like an emerald in the summer sun. It is Diamond Island,² one of the best known of the many exquisite isles that gem the more distant portions of the little inland sea; which here boasts only about half-a-dozen, notwithstanding Cooper speaks of "countless islands" that may be seen from this spot.

¹ "There is one point on which we would wish to say a word before closing the preface. Hawk-Eye calls the *Lac du Saint Sacrement*, 'the Horican.' As we believe this to be an appropriation of the name that has its origin with ourselves, the time has arrived, perhaps, when the fact should be frankly admitted. While writing this book fully a quarter of a century since, it occurred to us that the French name of the lake was too complicated, the American too common-place, and the Indian too unpronounceable, for either to be used in a work of fiction. Looking over an ancient map, it was ascertained that a tribe of Indians, called '*Les Horicans*' by the French, existed in the neighborhood of this beautiful sheet of water. As every word uttered by Natty Bumppo was not to be received as rigid truth, we took the liberty of putting the 'Horican' into his mouth, as a substitute for 'Lake George.' . . . We relieve our conscience by the confession." [*Last of the Mohicans*, Ed. 1872, p. 4.] In connection with this subject, see the author's "Lake George: its Scenes and Characteristics," pp. 73, 74: "A Narrative of Events at Lake George," p. 5; and "Notes on the History of Fort George," p. 6. At the present time there is a unanimous desire on the part of the admirers of Lake George to secure the return to the old and beautiful name.

² Silliman, who was here in 1819, says: "The crystals are hardly surpassed by any in the world for transparency and perfection of form. They are, as usual, the six-sided prism, and are frequently terminated at both ends by six-sided pyramids. These last, of course, must be found loose, or, at least, not adhering to any rock; those which are broken off have necessarily only one pyramid."—*Silliman's Travels*, p. 153.

From time immemorial, Diamond Island has borne its present name, derived from the exquisite crystals with which the underlying rock abounds. Here is the scene of the fight which took place on this lake, Sept. 24, 1777, an occurrence that appears to have been purposely overlooked by the Americans at the time, and which has since failed to find a chronicler.¹

But before proceeding to give the narrative of this event it may be well to speak of several other points, and to make a brief statement of the military situation at that time.

First comes the question of the discovery of Lake George by the Europeans. According to the best knowledge that we possess, its waters were first seen by a white man in the year 1646.² It is true Champlain tells us that he saw the falls at the outlet of the lake in 1609, yet there is nothing whatever to indicate that he visited the lake itself, though the Indians had informed him of its existence. It is reasonable, therefore, to conclude that Lake George was seen for the first time by a European, May 29, 1646,³ when it received its name, "Lac du Saint Sacrement," from the Rev. Isaac Jogues, S. J., who, in company with Jean Bourdon, the celebrated engineer, was on his way south to effect a treaty with the Mohawks.

¹ This affair was alluded to by the English, though the Americans said nothing. Among recent writers, I have found no notice beyond that by Lossing in his Field Book, vol. i. p. 114. When the present writer composed his first work on Lake George he had not found the official account by Col. Brown.

² See *Relations des Jesuites*, 1646, p. 15.

³ Mr. Parkman, in his work on *The Jesuits in America* (p. 219), has indeed stated that Father Jogues ascended Lake George in 1642, when, in company with Père Goupin, he was carried away a prisoner by the Indians.

The opinion of Mr. Parkman is based on a manuscript account of that journey, taken down from Father Jogues's own lips by Father Buteux. The account, after describing the journey southward and over Lake Champlain, which occupied eight days, says that they "arrived at the place where one leaves the canoes" (*où l'on quitte les canots*), and then "marched southward three days by land," until they reached the Mohawk villages. But there is nothing whatever in the description, by which we can recognize a passage over Lake George, nothing about the portage, the falls, nor the outlet. Everything turns chiefly on the fact that they *arrived at the place where one leaves the canoes*. This place, it is assumed, was the head of Lake George, from whence there was a trail southward. Now in regard to the existence of such a trail at that period, there can be no doubt; yet unquestionably it was not the *only* trail followed by the Indians. The old French map shows two trails to the Mohawk villages, one from the head of Lake George, and the other from the South-west Bay.

It is true that Champlain, in 1609, intended to go to the Mohawk country, by Lake George, yet at the period of Jogues's captivity we have no account of any one taking that route. Father Jogues himself clearly did not cross the lake in 1646. It is distinctly said

Arriving at the outlet of the lake on the evening of *Corpus Christi*, they gave it the above name in honor of this festival, which falls on the Thursday following Trinity Sunday, and commemorates the alleged Real Presence of Christ in the Great Sacrament.

From this time until 1755 the lake was rarely visited by Europeans. At this period the French commenced the fortifications of Ticonderoga, while the English met the advance by the construction of Fort William Henry at the opposite end of the lake.

We pass over the struggles that took place on these waters during the French wars, and come to the period of the Revolution, when a feeble English garrison held possession of Ticonderoga, while Capt. Nordberg lived in a little cottage at the head of the lake, being the nominal commander of tenantless Fort George. With the commencement of the struggle for liberty, Lake George resumed its former importance as a part of the main highway to the Canadas, and by this route our troops went northward, until the tide turned, and our own soil, in the summer of 1777, became the scene of fresh invasion. Then Burgoyne's troops poured in like a flood, and for a time swept all before them. It was at this period that the fight at Diamond Island took place.

Burgoyne had pushed with his troops, by the Whitehall route, far to the southward of Lake George, being determined to strike at Albany, having

that they arrived at the end of the lake (*bout de lac*) on the eve of the Festival of *St. Sacrement*, when they named the lake, and the next day went south *on foot*, carrying their packs on their backs. This is the view given by every one who has treated the subject in print, including Mr. Parkman himself.

To this it has been answered that *bout de lac* always means the *head* of the lake, and that the terms are so used in the Relations; yet if we return to the *Relation* of 1668 (vol. iii. p. 5), detailing the journey of Fathers Fremin, Pieron and Bruyas, we find that this is not the case. The writer there says that while he and others delayed on an island in Lake Champlain, the boatmen went forward, “*landing at the end of the Lake (bout de lac) du St. Sacrement, and preparing for the portage.*” At this place, the north end of the lake, there is a heavy portage, in order to get around the Falls of Ticonderoga. In the next sentence he again calls this end of the lake, which is the north end or outlet, *bout de lac*. But we have also to remind the reader, that the place where Father Jogues *left his canoe*, in 1646, was at the north end of the lake (the foot), which he, like the others, calls *bout de lac*. The language is so translated by Parkman and others who have mentioned the circumstance. *Bout de lac*, in the Jesuit *Relations*, therefore does not mean the *head* of the lake. We see, then, that we have not sufficient reason for supposing that “*the place where one leaves the canoes*” meant the head, or south end of Lake George, and consequently that the alleged passage over the lake by Jogues, in 1642, is indefensible, on that ground.

left but a small force at Ticonderoga, a handful of men at Fort George, and a garrison at Diamond Island to guard the stores accumulated there. Seeing the opportunity thus broadly presented, Gen. Lincoln, acting under the direction of Gates, resolved to make an effort to destroy Burgoyne's line of communication, and, if possible, capture his supplies. He therefore despatched Col. John Brown with a force to attack Ticonderoga, an enterprise which, though attended with partial success, failed in the end. To this failure he subsequently added another, resulting from the fight at Diamond Island.

But since the printed accounts of the attack upon Ticonderoga are almost as meagre as those of the struggle at the island, we will here give the official report, which is likewise to be found among the Gates Papers, now in the possession of the Historical Society of New-York, prefacing the report, however, with the English statement of Burgoyne.

In the course of a vindication of his military policy, Gen. Burgoyne writes as follows:

"During the events stated above, an attempt was made against Ticonderoga by an army assembled under Major-General Lincoln, who found means to march with a considerable corps from Huberton undiscovered, while another column of his force passed the mountains Skenesborough and Lake George, and on the morning of the 18th of September a sudden and general attack was made upon the carrying place at Lake-George, Sugar-Hill, Ticonderoga, and Mount-Independence. The sea officers commanding the armed sloop stationed to defend the carrying place, as also some of the officers commanding at the post of Sugar-Hill and at the Portage, were surprised, and a considerable part of four companies of the 53d regiment were made prisoners; a block-house, commanded by Lieutenant Lord of the 53d, was the only post on that side that had time to make use of their arms, and they made a brave defence till cannon taken from the surprised vessel was brought against them.

"After stating and lamenting so fatal a want of vigilance, I have to inform your Lordship of the satisfactory events which followed.

"The enemy having twice summoned Brigadier General Powell, and received such answer as became a gallant officer entrusted with so important a post, and having tried during the course of four days several attacks, and being repulsed in all, retreated without having done any considerable damage.

"Brigadier General Powell, from whose report to me I extract this relation, gives great commendations to the regiment of Prince Frederick, and the other troops stationed at Mount-Independence. The Brigadier also mentions with great applause

the behaviour of Captain Taylor of the 21st regiment, who was accidentally there on his route to the army from the hospital, and Lieutenant Beecroft of the 24th regiment, who with the artificers in arms defended an important battery.”¹

Such is Burgoyne’s account of the attack upon Ticonderoga; next to which comes that of Col. Brown, who, for the second time in the course of his military experience, had an opportunity of exhibiting his valor in connection with the fort. His report to Gen. Lincoln runs as follows:

“ North end of lake George landing.
“ thursday Sep 10th 1777

“ Sir,

“ With great fatigue after marching all last night I arrived at this place at the break of day, and after the best disposition of the men, I could make, immediately began the attack, and in a few minutes, carried the place. I then without any loss of time detatched a considerable part of my men to the mills, where a greater number of the enemy were posted, who also were soon made prisoners, a small number of whom having taken possession of a block house in that Vicinity were with more difficulty bro’t to submission; but at the sight of a Cannon they surrendered. during this season of success, Mount Defiance also fell into our hands. I have taken possession of the old french lines at Ticonderoga, and have sent a flag demanding the surrender of Ty: and mount independence in strong and peremptory terms. I have had as yet no information of the event of Col^o. Johnsons attack on the mount. My loss of men in these several actions are not more than 3 or 4 killed and 5 wounded. the enemy’s loss; is less. I find myself in possession of 293 prisoners. Viz^t 2 captains, 9 subs. 2 Commissaries. non Commissioned officers and privates 143. British 119 Canadians, 18 artificers and retook more than 100 of our men. total 293, exclusive of the prisoners retaken.—The watercraft I have taken, is 150 batteaus below the falls on lake Champlain 50 above the falls including 17 gun boats and one armed sloop. arms equal to the number of prisoners. Some ammunition and many other things which I cannot now ascertain. I must not forget to mention a few Cannon which may be of great service to us. Tho: my success has hitherto answered my most sanguine expectations, I cannot promise myself great things, the events of war being so dubious in their nature, but shall do my best to distress the enemy all in my power, having regard to my retreat—There is but a small quantity of provisions at this place which I think will necessitate my retreat in case we do not carry Ty and independence—I hope you will use your utmost endeavor to give me assistance should I need in crossing the lake &c—The enemy but a very small force at fort George. Their boats are on an island about 14 miles from this guarded by six companies, having artillery

¹ State of the Expedition from Canada. By Burgoyne. p. xciv. Ed. 1780.

—I have much fear with respect to the prisoners, being obliged to send them under a small guard—I am well informed that considerable reinforcements is hourly expected at the lake under command of Sir John Johnson—This minute received Gen^l. Powals answer to my demand in these words, ‘The garrison intrusted to my charge I shall defend to the last.’ Indeed I have little hopes of putting him to the necessity of giving it up unless by the force under Colonel Johnson.

“Gen^l Lincoln.¹

“I am &

“JOHN BROWN.”

We now turn to the fight at Diamond Island, giving first the English version, simply remarking as a preliminary, that in the postscript of a letter address, by Jonas Fay to Gen. Gates, dated Bennington, Sept. 22, 1771, is the following:

“By a person just arrived from Fort George—only 30 men are at that place and 2 Gun Boats anchor’d at a distance from land and that the enemy have not more than 3 weeks provision.”²

Writing from Albany after his surrender, Gen. Burgoyne says, under the date of Oct. 27th, that

“On the 24th instant, the enemy, enabled by the capture of the gunboats and bateaux which they had made after the surprise of the sloop, to embark upon Lake George, attacked Diamond Island in two divisions.

“Captain Aubrey and two companies of the 47th regiment, had been posted at that island from the time the army passed the Hudson’s River, as a better situation for the security of the stores at the south end of Lake George than Fort George, which is on the continent, and not tenable against artillery and numbers. The enemy were repulsed by Captain Aubrey with great loss, and pursued by the gun-boats under his command to the east shore, where two of their principal vessels were retaken, together with all the cannon. They had just time to set fire to the other bateaux and retreated over the mountains.”³

This statement was based upon the report made by Lieut. Irwine, the commander at Lake George, whose communication appears to have fallen into the hands of Gates, at the surrender of Burgoyne.

¹ Gates Papers, p. 194. ² Ibid. p. 208.

³ State of the Expedition from Canada, p. 53.

Lieut. Geo. Irwine, of the 47th, reports thus to Lieut. Francis Clark, aid-de-camp to Gen. Burgoyne:

“Fort George 24th Sept. 1777.

“Sir

“I think it necessary to acquaint you for the information of General Burgoyne, that the enemy, to the amount of two or three hundred men came from Skenesborough to the carrying place near Tyconderoga and there took seventeen or eighteen Batteaus with Gunboats—Their design was first to attack the fort but considering they could not well accomplish it without cannon they desisted from that scheme, they were then resolved to attack Diamond Island (which Island Capt. Aubrey commands) and if they succeeded, to take this place, they began to attack the Island with cannon about 9 o'clock yesterday morning, I have the satisfaction to inform you that after a cannonading for near an hour and a half on both sides the enemy took to their retreat. Then was Gun boats sent in pursuit of them which occasioned the enemy to burn their Gun boats and Batteaus and made their escape towards Skenesborough in great confusion—we took one Gun boat from them with a twelve pounder in her and a good quantity of ammunition—we have heard there was a few kill'd and many wounded of them. There was not a man killed or hurt during the whole action of his Majesty's Troops. I have the honor to be Sir your most obedient and most humble Servt

“Geo^e Irwine Com at Fort George

“Lt^t 47th[”]¹

We next give the report of Col. Brown, who writes as follows, and not without chagrin:

“Skeensboro Friday 11 o'clock, a m. Sept 26th 1777

“Dear Sir

“I this minute arrived at this place by the way of Fort Ann, was induced to take this rout on ac^t of my Ignorance of the situation of every part of the continental Army—

“On the 22 inst^t at 4 o'clk P.M. I set sail from the north end Lake George with 20 sail of Boats three of which were armed, Viz one small sloop mounting 3 guns. and 2 British Gun Boats having on Board the whole about 420 Men officers included with a Determined resolution to attack Diamond Island which lies within 5 miles Fort George at the break of Day the next Morning, but a very heavy storm coming on prevented—I arrived Sabbath Day point abt midnight where I tarried all night,

¹ Gates Papers, p. 218.

during which time I [sic] small Boat in the fleet taken the Day before coming from Fort George, conducted by one Ferry lately a sutler in our army, I put Ferry on his Parole, but in the night he found Means to escape with his Boat, and informed the Enemy of our approach, on the 23d I advanced as far as 12 Mile Island, the Wind continuing too high for an attack I suspended it untill the Morning of the 24th at 9 o'clock at which Time I advanced with the 3 armed Boats in front and the other Boats, I ordered to wing to the Right and left of Island to attempt a landing if practicable, and to support the Gun Boats in case they should need assistance, I was indued to make this experiment to find the strength of the Island as also to carry it if practicable—the enemy gave me the first fire which I returned in good earnest, and advanced as nigh as I thought prudent, I soon found that the enemy had been advertised of our approach and well prepared for our reception having a great number of cannon well mounted with good Breast Works, I however approached within a small Distance giving the Enemy as hot a fire as in my Power, untill the sloop was hulled between wind and Water and obliged to toe her off and one of the boats so damaged as I was obliged to quit her in the action. I had two men killed two Mortally wounded and several others wounded in such Manner as I was obliged to leave them under the Care of the Inhabitants, who I had taken Prisoners giving them a sufficient reward for their services.

I Run my Boats up a Bay a considerable distance and burnt them with all the Baggage that was not portable—The Enemy have on Diamond Island as near as could be collected are about three hundred, and about 40 at Fort George with orders if they are attacked to retreat to the Island—Gen^l Borgoigne has about 4 Weeks Provision with his army and no more, he is determined to cut his Road through to Albany at all events, for this I have the last authority, still I think him under a small mistake—Most of the Horses and Cattle taken at Ty and thereabouts were left in the Woods. Gen^l Warner has put out a party in quest of them.

“ I am Dear Sr wishing you and the

“ Main Army

“ great Success your most obt

“ hum^l Sert

“ JNO BROWN

“ Gen^l Lincoln

“ NB You may Depend on it that after the British Army were supply with six Weeks provision which was two weeks from the Communication between Lake George and Fort Edward was ordered by Gen^l Burgoigne to be stor'd and no passes given—

“ The attack on the Island continued with interruption 2 Hours.”¹

¹ Gates Papers, p. 220.

Thus ended the fight at Diamond Island ; a fight which, if attended with better success, might have perhaps hastened the surrender of Burgoyne, and resulted in other advantages to the American arms. As it was, however, the British line of communication on Lake George was not broken, while the American leaders took good care to prevent this failure from reaching the public ear through the press. Thus Col. Brown's reports to Gen. Lincoln remained unpublished. They have now been brought out and put on permanent record, as interesting material for American history.

As regards the island in more recent times, there is little to tell. It once boasted a little house of entertainment ; but that has long since passed away. To-day the summer tourist who rows out to this lovely isle, which commands delightful views of the lake far and wide, will see no evidences of Col. Brown's fight, but will find the very atmosphere bathed in perfect peace. Of relics of the old wars, which for more than a hundred years caused the air to jar, and echoing hills to complain,—there are none. The ramparts that once bristled with cannon have been smoothed away, and the cellar of an ancient house is all the visitor will find among the birches to tell of the olden occupancy of man.



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